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ABSTRACT

Although activity theory proposes a strong relationship between social activity and life satisfaction among older individuals, little research has considered the salience of the activity to the individual. In order to consider the salience of the activity, using volunteer activity as a measure, survey results from the Myths and Realities of Aging in America study (Harris, 1975), commissioned by the National Council on Aging, were used. Data on 1,491 (from a sample of 4,254) respondents having complete survey responses were analyzed. The independent variables were volunteer status, marital status, race, sex, employment, age, and level of interaction with family and friends. Life satisfaction was assessed by the Life Satisfaction Index (A). An analysis of the results showed only a low positive association between volunteerism and life satisfaction. The relationship of frequency of volunteering and life satisfaction was not supported by the data. Analysis of the independent variables indicated that only health status significantly correlated with life satisfaction. These findings draw into serious question the postulates of activity theory and its role in social gerontology. (BL)

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Volunteerism and Life Satisfaction in Older People: A Test of Activity Theory

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THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The subject of volunteerism among older people is important for many reasons, both theoretical and applied. From a theoretical perspective it is important to examine the relationship between volunteerism and life satisfaction or other conceptualizations of subjective well-being. It has been assumed that active participation in some continuing volunteer activity, whether organized or non-organized, would have a positive impact on the individual's sense of subjective well-being. This belief has been voiced by many advocates of a larger role for older persons in volunteer activity and the constructive use of leisure time. Beverly (1975:122) quotes Professor James Peterson:

> One of the great values of constructive creative work or play is that we get a sense of having invested ourselves and forgotten ourselves as a result of such activity. Therefore, older people who can participate in good constructive leisure have the by-product of life satisfaction.

She provides us with a succinct statement of a common, though relatively untested, assertation:

> To its donors, volunteer work provides an effective prophylaxis against the debilitating effects of boredom and lack of purpose. It affords a chance for fulfillment and for the exercise of creativity and individuality regardless of the donor's age.

The view that volunteerism provides important rewards to the volunteer is also current among laypersons. In an address to a local chapter of Literacy Volunteers of America, Barbara Bush, spouse of Vice President George Bush, asserted: "Volunteerism is one of the most rewarding experiences a person can have." (Dean, 1982:1)

These statements are illustrative of a general perspective prevalent in social gerontology labelled activity theory. Dating back to the research of Cavan and associates (1949) and Havighurst and Albrecht (1953), many gerontologists have adopted the view that the most effective means of maintaining a positive self image and weathering the changes concomitant with aging is to

remain in commerce with life. Focusing on the concept of personal adjustment, Cavan et al. (1949:14-16) defined aging as a time in which the individual is involved in a process of adapting to changing social situations and physical abilities. The "cycle" of adjustment is precipitated by the frustration experienced by many older adults when activities that had been part of their daily round of life (work, family rearing and marital relations, for example) are discontinued. This frustration results in insults to feelings of subjective well-being and can be mitigated through two mechanisms; a redefinition of one's attitudes to mesh with one's perception of the situation or an "adaptation of activities," which often takes the form of involvement in new activities.

Researchers have studied the relationship between social activity and life satisfaction, one of a class of concepts that fall under the general rubric of subjective well-being. A formal, axiomatic delineation of activity theory has been provided by Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson (1972). Derived from the symbolic interactionist school in sociological theory the basic premise of activity theory is:

> Activity provides various role supports necessary for reaffirming one's self concept. The more intimate and the more frequent the activity, the more reinforcing and the more specific will be the role supports. Role supports are necessary for the maintenance of a positive self concept, which in turn is associated with high life satisfaction. (Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson, 1972:515)

A critical failure of activity theory, however, has been the inadequate conceptualization of activity. It has been variously defined in terms of the number of solitary pursuits, memberships in formal organizations, and informal interaction with family, friends, and neighbors (Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson, 1972; Larson, 1978; Edwards and Klemmack, 1973) and general measures of social activity (Palmore and Luikart, 1972). The crucial shortcoming is that these various measures of activity fail to assess, either directly or indirectly,

the importance or salience of the activity to the individual.

Previous research investigating the relationship of activity, in its varied conceptualizations, with subjective well-being (life satisfaction, morale, happiness, and adjustment have been used to conceptualize the dependent variable) has evidenced mixed results. Here an attempt is made to consider the salience of the activity by using volunteerism as the measure of activity.

The question of whether we should continue to expand volunteer programs for the elderly is one not often raised. It is assumed that these opportunities are mutually beneficial, to the volunteer and also to the agency or group that utilizes the senior volunteer, and that they should be perpetuated and expanded.

Methods

Data

The data analyzed in this research was collected in a survey conducted in May, June, and July, 1974 by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. The study, The Myths and Realities of Aging in America (Harris, 1975), was commissioned by the National Council on the Aging (NCOA) to examine, among other topics, the personal experiences of old age.

From a sample of 4254 respondents representative of the civilian, non-institutionalized, adult (18 and over) population of the United States a subsample of 1,658 older people was selected of whom 1,491 had complete responses on all the questions used to measure dependent and independent variables. Data from these complete surveys is the basis for the following analysis.

Independent Variables

Volunteer status, marital status, race, sex and employment were operationalized as dichotomies for inclusion as independent variables in the Multiple Classification Analysis. Because of limitations in the number of nominal and

ordinal level variables that can be analyzed in the SPSS (Nie et al., 1975) version of MCA, degree of seriousness of health problems and levels of income and education will be treated as internal data which "rarely alters the results of the statistical analysis to an appreciable degree" (Labovitz, 1967:153). Age and level of interaction with family and friends (Social Involvement Scale) complete the battery of independent variables utilized to test the hypothesized relationship between volunteerism and life satisfaction, the dependent variable.

Gerontological researchers have operationalized the concept of subjective well-being in a variety of fashions. Some have used a single item measure (Spreitzer and Snyder, 1974), an happiness scale (Havighurst and Albrecht, 1953), and multidimensional scales (Neugarten et al., 1961; Bradburn, 1969).

Neugarten, Havighurst and Tobin's (1961) Life Satisfaction Index (A) and its modifications (Wood et al., 1969; Hoyt and Creech, 1983) have been used as operational definitions of life satisfaction in myriad studies (Cutler, 1973; Wylie, 1970; McClelland, 1982; Hunter and Linn, 1980-81; Markaides and Martin, 1979; Knapp, 1976; Hoyt et al., 1980; Wolk and Telleen, 1976; Edwards and Klemmack, 1973; and Lemon et al., 1972). It has been accepted by researchers as a valid and reliable measure of the concept life satisfaction (Lohmann, 1980; Stock and Okun, 1982; Wood et al., 1969). Sauer and Warland (1982), in a review of instruments used in life satisfaction research, advocate usage of the LSIA when the research design calls for a measure of life satisfaction. With data from this representative sample of older people the reliability of the 18 item Life Satisfaction Index (A) was assessed and a Cronbach's Alpha of .84 was produced.

Statistical Techniques

A multivariate statistical technique, multiple classification analysis was used to assess the effects of volunteering on the life satisfaction in the elderly

while holding constant the influence of other factors that have been found to be related to subjective well being in older people.

MCA is a form of multiple regression using dummy variables (Suits, 1957). It is designed to handle categorical, correlated predictors and non-linear relationships and requires a dependent variable that is intervally measured (Andrews et al., 1973).

MCA produces a measure of the zero order relationship between the independent and dependent variables (eta) and beta, a measure of association where the effects of the covariates are held constant.

Because of the size of the sample utilized we will not rely on F-scores and tests of significance to decide the fate of the hypothesis under study (Henkel, 1976; Selvin, 1957). As an alternative, the decisions to support the hypothesis will be based on an examination of the size of beta. Sewell et al. (1970) suggest that an arbitrary size for beta be set at $\pm$ .15 as the criterion for support of the hypothesis.

Results

The central focus of this study is the extent, if any, to which volunteerism affects the life satisfaction of older people. Respondents were asked: "Apart from any work you're paid for, do you do any volunteer work, or not? The operational hypothesis under consideration is: Those who volunteer will have higher life satisfaction scores than those who do not volunteer.

Data from Table 1 indicates that at the zero order there are differences in mean life satisfaction scores between volunteers and non-volunteers. Eta and beta statistics from Table 2, however, fail to provide support for our hypothesis. The unadjusted eta indicates a low positive association (eta=.23) between volunteerism and life satisfaction. When the effects of volunteerism are assessed in

a multivariate context the association is diminished (beta=.09) and fails to achieve a magnitude that would encourage support for the hypothesis.

In an effort to further assess the utility of volunteer work in affecting life satisfaction the relationship between frequency of volunteering (hardly any, some but not a lot, a lot) and life satisfaction was also examined. This additional analysis provided further lack of support for this hypothesis. While eta showed a low positive association (eta=.21), beta (.09) indicated the weakness of frequency of volunteering as a predictor of subjective well being.

Subsequently multiple regression analysis to assess the utility of the covariates (health, income, education, level of interaction, and age) in affecting life satisfaction. That analysis highlighted the significance of health status (Table 3, beta=-.43) and the inutility of the other covariates in explaining variation in life satisfaction scores.

DISCUSSION

One consequence of this study is to call into question the efficacy of volunteer service in effecting life satisfaction among the elderly. Wylie (1970:39) argues that life satisfaction, especially as operationalized by the Life Satisfaction Index (Z), the measure used in this study, be used as an evaluation tool to assess the "program impact upon the lives of members of the target population." Following her suggestion it can be seen that volunteering has a weak association with life satisfaction in a univariate relationship and when other confounding factors are controlled the association vanishes.

While affirming, in part, the research of Carp (1968) it would be premature, given the paucity of empirical research on the effects of volunteer service on the volunteer, to conclude that older people do not derive some benefits from volunteering. Further clarification of the consequences of volunteering, possibly

through its association with feelings of objective and subjective integration (Longino et al., 1980; Laing et al., 1980; Laing, 1982) is necessary.

From a theoretical perspective this project is important in a paradoxical fashion. The contention that activity theory could be improved by considering the meaningfulness of activities, not simply activity itself, in the activity-life satisfaction equation has not been substantiated.

The present analysis has lead to serious questions regarding the vitality of activity theory as the implicit or explicit perspective underlying the gerontologic enterprise in its academic and service oriented components. After generations of research founded on this perspective little support has been generated which affirms its accuracy in delineating the mechanisms that foster positive life satisfaction in old age.

The contribution of this study is a rather macbre one, "pulling the plug" on activity theory. To continue the analogy, activity theory has been in critical condition since its formal explication in 1972. It almost died a premature death when Lemon et al. found little support for its basic assumptions. It was revived in numerous research projects where the data analysis was univariate and the sampling purposive. Although the prognosis in terms of empirical support was clouded, the theory as patient has been artifically sustained by researchers and practioners who utilize it as the organizing model for their work.

The research community is now at a watershed. The present study has failed to give new life to activity theory and suggests that efforts at resuscitation be discontinued, allow the mounting body of empirical data to facilitate a decision to withdraw "life sustaining" support. Attention should be focused instead on those theories in their nascency: for example, social reconstruction theory (Kuypers and Bengston, 1973), exchange theory (Dowd, 1975), socioenviron-

mental theory (Gubrium, 1973), and continuity theory (Covey, 1981).

SUMMARY

This study has attempted a clarification of activity theory based on the concept of salience, the meaningfulness of the activity. With data from a national sample of older Americans, statistical analysis revealed that volunteering, defined as a salient activity, did not have any significant independent impact on life satisfaction. The data analysis did, however, reiterate the importance of good health in maintaining a sense of subjective well being in old age.

TABLE 1

Mean Life Satisfaction Scores

Grand Mean = 24.15

VARIABLE	N	UNADJUSTED	ADJUSTED FOR INDEPENDENTS	ADJUSTED FOR INDEPENDENTS & COVARIATES
Volunteer				
No	1216	23.28	23.44	23.83
Yes	275	27.98	27.31	25.56
Marital Status				
Not Married	799	22.77	22.75	23.30
Married	692	25.74	25.76	25.25
Race				
White	1352	24.53	24.47	24.23
Black	140	20.46	21.03	23.41
Employment Status				
Working	174	26.57	25.82	24.14
Not working	1317	23.83	23.93	24.15
Sex				
Male	589	24.10	23.29	23.39
Female	902	24.18	23.59	24.64

Standard Deviation = 7.863

N = 1491

TABLE 2.

Multiple Classification Analysis

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	ETA	ETA^2	BETA ADJUSTED FOR INDEPENDENTS	BETA ADJUSTED FOR INDEPENDENTS & COVARIATES
Volunteer	.23	.05	.19	.09
Marital Status	.19	.04	.19	.13
Race	.15	.02	.13	.03
Employment Status	.11	.01	.08	.00
Sex	.00	.00	.09	.08
Multiple R^2			.109	.319
Multiple R			.330	.565

COVARIATES	UNSTANDARDIZED B's
Health	-4.452
Age	.000
Education	.385
Income	.327
Interaction	.124

N = 1491

TABLE 3.

Multiple Regression Analysis

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	UNSTANDARDIZED B	BETA
Interaction	.18	.11
Income	.40	.12
Age	-.02	-.01
Education	.42	.11
Health	-4.21	-.43

Multiple R .54

Multiple R^2 .29

N = 1491

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